

Who Are We As Christians?

by Mark Jarvinen

INTRODUCTION

As we begin this morning, imagine being a tourist in Southern Greece in the year 55 A.D. You arrive at a bustling city of approximately 100,000 people, located on a narrow isthmus, joining a peninsula to the mainland, with scenic coastland visible to the east and the west. You secure your lodging for the night and decide to look around. Quickly you realize that this port city is heavily engaged in the shipbuilding industry. You also see signs of a booming economy with ships laden with cargo continuously arriving and departing. The city is cosmopolitan and multi-cultural with people from numerous ethnic and occupational backgrounds milling about. Nearby is a huge stadium where athletic contests periodically attract the interest of the masses from miles around. You look to the top of a hill overlooking the city and notice a rather large, ornate building. You ask around and learn that it's a temple built in honor of Aphrodite, the fertility goddess of love. You ask a few more questions and learn that the local version of religion is what many from other parts of the world would consider immoral. Over 1,000 prostitutes work in the temple, and to visit one is considered an act of worship.

A bit blown away by what you've seen and heard, you notice the symbol of a fish on what appears to be a residence, and to your surprise, you discover that there's a church in this city. You meet a group of Christians who believe the same things you do. It's a

relatively new church and quite small. You're not surprised to learn that although they have their struggles, given the cultural obstacles and temptations they face; nonetheless, they appear to be a caring group that loves the Lord. As you fellowship together, someone bursts through the door clutching a parchment letter. The breathless messenger explains that the letter is from the Apostle Paul, the founder of their fellowship and several other home groups throughout the city. As the messenger reads the introduction to Paul's letter aloud, it's clear his intent is to encourage the Christians there as he reminds them of who they are as believers in Jesus Christ, living in the first-century Grecian city of **Corinth**.

I think you'll agree that ancient Corinth had similarities to cities in our world today. Culturally, Bible commentator, **Gordon Fee**, likens Corinth to a blend of the cities of **New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas** as we know them today. The letter is just as relevant to us today as it was to these first century believers from Corinth. Let's consider how **I Corinthians 1:1-9** of Paul's letter speak to the question of our identity: "**Who Are We As Christians?**" Reading in Jesus' Name

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, ² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus

Christ,⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor. 1:1-9 ESV)

Who Are We As Christians?

I. We Are Those With a Clear Identity In Christ.

Paul starts his letter by reminding the people that he is an “**apostle**,” one sent as a messenger of God to convey not his own ideas, but the very words of God. In **v. 2**, Paul identifies the recipients of his letter as – “... ***the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints (holy).***” The word “sanctified” means to be set apart as those who are holy. As we scan the pages of this letter, it hardly seems appropriate that Paul calls the Corinthians “sanctified” and “holy.” There were divisions within the church. They were filing law-suits against one another. The temple prostitution that had been part of their pagan religious practice had for some, carried over into the church as sexual immorality. Some were mixing their remembrance of the last supper with rites that were part of their previous idol worship. There was confusion and self-centeredness among them over the purpose and use of spiritual gifts. The Corinthian Church had all kinds of problems! How in the world could Paul call these people holy?

Paul could call them sanctified and holy because objectively or positionally, by grace and through faith, that’s exactly who they were. In **v. 8**, Paul describes them as “***guiltless***” (“***blameless***”). Understand that when God looks at us, He says, “***You are holy.***” How can that be? I know I don’t always think and act like a Christian. In fact, raise your hand right now if you didn’t make any mistakes this

past week. Have you ever dropped a glass and watched it shatter on the floor or dinged your car door on the car parked next to you in the parking lot. Would you like to share the words that escaped your lips? ☺ God hears every word we say, and even worse, He knows our every thought. Surely God knows the ways in which we've been selfish this past week. Can anyone honestly say based on their thoughts and actions that they are holy and guiltless? Actually, because we fall short in the categories of thought, word, and deed, aren't we deserving of punishment? Don't we deserve to be cast away from God's presence? God is tough on sin. ***"The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).***

But wait! Paul called the Corinthians sanctified and holy, guiltless in the eyes of God. The same applies to Christians today. We too are sanctified and holy. How can this be in light of the ways in which we fall short? Are we saying that the Word of God must be wrong? The answer lies in what Jesus Christ has done for us. We aren't holy based on our own thoughts, words, and deeds, but Christ made us holy by taking all our shortcomings, our sins, upon Himself, dying on the cross in our place, becoming our substitute. Because of what Christ has done, God in love, looks at each one of us and says, ***"You are holy! Not because of your perfect motives and behavior, but because Jesus has taken your sins away." This is good news because it tells us that no matter what mistakes we've made, whatever sins we've committed, our lives aren't permanently ruined.*** Jesus, by His finished work on the cross, makes forgiveness possible. By God's grace, through faith in Christ, we know who we are in God's eyes on the merits of what Christ has accomplished for us.

In Christ, we are sanctified and made holy. The burden of our sins has been lifted.

So I ask again ... Who Are We As Christians?

II. We Are Those Enriched With Spiritual Gifts.

In vv. 4-5, Paul writes –

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—”

Then in v. 7a, he continues, saying, - ***“so that you are not lacking in any (spiritual) gift,”*** We’re not limited to our natural abilities.

In other words, according to God’s Word, the relatively small group of Christians in Corinth had all the gifting they needed, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, to be a fully functioning congregation. Sometimes small churches suffer from low self-esteem. Community of Joy is a small congregation. As such it becomes easy to focus on what we don’t have, especially as we compare ourselves with some of the larger churches in Eagan and south of the river. Can we hear the words of Paul to the Corinthians, as words spoken to us, ***“... you are not lacking in any spiritual gift”?*** Of course it’s obvious that we don’t have all the bells and whistles that some churches have. But biblically, those are the little things. The big things, the important things, we are not lacking. We have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge as v. 5 makes clear. Look at those of us gathered in worship here today. We’re regular, ordinary people. Yet, God’s Word tells us that we are anything but ordinary. Spiritually speaking, we are ***“enriched in him”*** (in Christ) in every way necessary to grow and mature in our faith.

So what is our attitude concerning “the bells and whistles” when it comes to discerning what the church is all about? Let’s be honest, they’re nice, **BUT NOT AS OUR PRIMARY FOCUS.** When it comes down to it, isn’t the purpose of the church to grow and mature in Christ as the Holy Spirit works through the Word to equip us to discover and utilize the gift or gifts we’ve been given by God’s grace? It’s been encouraging and refreshing over the years to see CoJ uniting around this purpose.

Once More ... Who Are We As Christians?

III. We Are Those Who Know Christ Will Sustain Us To The End.

In vv. 7b-8, Paul writes –

“as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The reference to ***“the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ”*** is speaking of **Judgment Day.** Here we have essentially the same promise that Paul shares with the **Philippians**, in 1:6 of that letter:

“being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

In other words, until the Day of Judgment those of us who are in Christ will be kept and sustained by the grace of God. Regardless of our own sins and weaknesses, which are under the forgiving blood of Christ, and the trials and adversities we face, which are for the building up of our faith, Christ is present and at work to sustain us. This means that our future is secure, until at the day the Lord we will be taken home. I don’t mean that we know we’ll be saved in a glib, shallow, **“once saved, always saved”** fashion, but in a humble recognition of the

costliness of His grace and the lengths that God was willing to go in order to save us.

That said, God is worthy of our trust in regard to our future. Listen to v. 9, of our text -

“God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.”

Notice that it is God who has taken the initiative toward us by calling us into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ; but it doesn't stop there - He is ***“faithful.”*** In other words, God is active on our behalf to secure our future and we can count on Him to be true to His promise.

Think about it! None of us knows what the future will bring. Think about your money situation. Will there be enough when you retire? A number of you are just now finding out. Martha and I will be right behind you. You're hoping the economy doesn't tank again, in spite of warnings of an impending downturn in the market. Think about your health. You can lead the healthiest lifestyle imaginable, exercising regularly, eating right, and getting enough sleep, only to hear about some active, vigorous person suddenly stricken by illness and hanging on by a thread. It's certainly true that none of us can predict the future. But there is one thing of which, by faith, we can be certain. **Verse 8** tells us that -

“He will sustain you to the end,” or as the NIV says, ***“He will keep you strong to the end, so that (with the result that) you will be guiltless (blameless) on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”***

This means that as Christians **we can be certain of what happens to our souls.** When we die, or when Jesus returns, and we

stand before God, He will look into our hearts and find the faith that believes that our sins have been washed away by the blood of His Son. He will see that we believe in and are relying on Jesus as our Savior. He will call us blameless and welcome us into heaven. This is the certainty we have about the future. Herein lies our hope, comfort, and strength. This is the ultimate answer to the question, “**Who Are We As Christians?**” We are those who will live with Him for all eternity. **A-men.**